

## **“I Know Him”**

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*[Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Then he went about among the villages teaching. <sup>7</sup>He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. <sup>8</sup>He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. <sup>10</sup>He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup>If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” <sup>12</sup>So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup>They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:1-13)*

It makes sense that, at the end of this long weekend when we’ve been heartily celebrating our nation’s declaration of independence from Britain in 1776, an image that this scripture brought to my mind was that of King George in the Broadway musical “Hamilton.” I love all three of his numbers in the show, but my favorite might be the last one, “I Know Him.”

George Washington and Alexander Hamilton have just sung their way through Washington’s eloquent and thoughtful Farewell Address, in which he declares he is stepping down and will not be seeking a third term as President. The news has made it to London, and it blows King George’s mind. The idea that a sovereign would simply relinquish his duties was incomprehensible to one who had always been told, and always believed, that he ruled by divine right. “I’m perplexed,” King George sings. “Are they going to keep on replacing whoever’s in charge? If so, who’s next? There’s nobody else in their country who looms quite as large.”

An aide then draws near and whispers a name in the king’s ear. “John Adams?” he repeats incredulously. “I know him, that can’t be.” Clearly, the short, pudgy Adams had not made much of an impression on the crown as a diplomat. “That poor man, they’re going to eat him alive!” The song ends with the increasingly unhinged king laughing the words “President John Adams? Good luck!”

All of this is not that far removed from this story of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus had already been preaching and teaches in places that knew him well, places like Capernaum, where Peter was from. And things went great there. So, it makes sense that Jesus and the disciples would have expected an even greater reception in his true hometown of Nazareth. They certainly knew him there. Even as a boy growing up



there, Jesus had been a religious whiz kid. The gospel of Luke tells us that, when Jesus was only twelve years old, he wowed some of the most learned rabbis in the world with his ability to interpret the scripture and debate the covenant law. So Jesus returning to the synagogue in Nazareth might be a lot like Bruce Springsteen or John Bon Jovi coming back to play a concert in New Jersey. Everyone is excited to see the hometown boy who made good. You can just hear his old classmates elbowing their friends saying, “You know, I was in third grade with him.”

That seems to be the way it went, at least at first. Everyone who came to see him on that Sabbath in the synagogue were once again amazed and astounded at his teaching. But then, another feeling began to creep in. “Wait a minute,” they thought. “Isn’t he the carpenter’s boy? Isn’t James his brother? And Joses? Those guys aren’t anything special.”

And -- maybe gradually, maybe all of the sudden -- their amazement wore off. They could not connect what they were seeing and hearing to that little boy they once knew. “Where did all this come from?” they asked. “Where did he get all this?”

Maybe part of it was jealousy... the kind that sometimes creeps in at high school reunions, with the unavoidable show-and-tell nature of it all, and the classmates who are “winning” at life inevitably make the not-so-lucky ones feel a little “less than.”<sup>1</sup>

Or maybe they had hoped there would be some special perks in knowing such a popular person. As the prominent New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan once wrote, “If Jesus was a well-known magician, healer, or miracle-worker, first, his immediate family, and, next, his village, would expect to benefit from and partake in the handling of that fame and those gifts. Any Mediterranean peasant would expect an expanding ripple of patronage... to go out from Jesus, through his family and his village, to the outside world.”<sup>2</sup> As people who “knew him when,” they were looking to cash in. They weren’t just thinking, “We know him.” They were thinking, “Hey, we knew him first!”

But it did not take them long to realize that Jesus was not playing that game. They had hoped for special status, but Jesus said, in the kingdom of God, the first become last and the last become first. The people of Nazareth wanted the best seats at the table, but Jesus reserved the VIP seats not for his cronies, but for the poor, the lame, and the stranger in their midst. They fully expected Jesus’ fame to profit them, but Jesus preached that whoever wanted to be great must be the servant of all.<sup>3</sup> Giving insiders a leg up was never Jesus’ style. But when Jesus refused to deliver the goods for his hometown, it felt like he was “turning his back on Nazareth and on his family.”<sup>4</sup>

All of this, I get. I can empathize with the very human expectations, the high hopes, and the disappointments. I can understand why Jesus would have been disappointed too, by their unbelief. Surely he had hoped for better from the people who knew him best.

What is harder for me to understand is verse 5, which says this: that “*he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.*” The gospel message that we have been taught and internalized is a story of good news for all, good news of a God who comes to seek out and save the lost. It’s as simple as it gets: “Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Mechling and Rachel Dodes, “Why are class reunions so terrifying?” <https://www.theguardian.com>, July 5, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan, <https://www.faithfutures.org/JDB/jdb022.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 20:26.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

*loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is \_\_\_\_\_?"* Yes, strong! We do not have the capacity to save ourselves, we may not have the power to heal ourselves, but Jesus does. So what are we to make of this statement that Jesus came to town to do a job, but he could not get it done... that there were wounds that Jesus could not heal... challenges that Jesus could not overcome?

The first thing we need to notice is that Jesus was not completely powerless in Nazareth. The text says outright that he could do no deeds of power, "***except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.***" So Jesus did do some stuff. In fact, he did the very same stuff that had been impressing and amazing people in other villages.

Personally, I do not think Mark intended to minimize Jesus' power of the healings he accomplished in Nazareth. What Mark wanted was for his readers to see the irony of what happened there. I compare it to what the North Carolina State basketball team did in the ACC this past season. They limped into the ACC tournament with a losing record for the season. They even had to play on Tuesday night, which meant they were seeded as one of the worst teams in the conference. So, yeah, you could say that the Wolfpack was not able to do any "deeds of power" in the ACC this year, except that in March they ran the table on the whole conference, beating Louisville, Syracuse, Duke, Virginia, and ultimately UNC to take the ACC crown, the lowest seeded team to ever win the nation's premier conference tournament. That is the kind of irony Mark wanted his readers to see when he said that Jesus could do no deeds of power in Nazareth, except that he did do the exact same miracles that were blowing everyone else's minds everywhere else he went.

In other words, this wasn't a statement about Jesus' power – it was a statement about the disappointing reaction of the town. It's not that the people of Nazareth should not have been amazed– it was that they had decided that they did not want to be amazed. They made a choice to diminish Jesus in their own minds. And Mark's readers are left wondering what ***could have been*** if the townspeople had not reacted that way. Imagine what could have been accomplished if Jesus' own people, in his own hometown, had welcomed him, trusted in him, and joined with him.

As is so often the case in the Kingdom of God, Christ takes what seems like a failure, turns it around, and transforms it into a valuable lesson. As he sends the disciples out two by two into the world, he shares his power with them. He gives them divine authority to preach and teach and heal just as he has been doing. But he also warns them. "Much of what will happen," he says, "will depend on how the people accept you, welcome you, and listen to you. Just as I was rejected in my hometown, you will likely be rejected by some. If it can happen to me, it can happen to you. Out there, you are going to win some, and you are going to lose some. Nothing is guaranteed, so take nothing for granted."

The same message is meant for us in two ways. First, we are sent just as the original disciples were sent. We have been equipped with knowledge and power to share the story of God with the world. Nothing is guaranteed, so we take nothing for granted. But we are sent out to speak and to serve.

But before we can be speakers, we must first be hearers. It all begins with how we receive Christ. Are we ready to welcome him, to trust his Word, and acknowledge his deeds of power? Or are we skeptical? Are we still a little too dubious? Are there ways that we are refusing to hear?

If there is one thing we learn from the people of Nazareth, it is this: in the end, it is not enough just to know him. ***Amen.***